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BRIDGEPORT CHILD ADVOCACY COALITION

TO THE

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

MARCH 23, 2009

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Testimony of Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition
For Education Committee

The Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition (BCAC) appreciates the opportunity to testify before the Education Committee of the 2009 General Assembly about two bills on the hearing agenda today.

HB 6688 Education Grants.

Increase Weighting for ELL Students in ECS Formula.

We strongly support the proposal from Rep. Auden Grogins, former Bridgeport Board of Education President, as well as others to make long-overdue reforms to the ECS formula. The General Assembly has made some reforms to the formula, but more are needed to address the huge and growing achievement gap in the State of Connecticut. We urge the committee to reform the ECS formula to provide **weighting for ELL (English Language Learner) students that is double the weighting for poor students.** Even the Governor's own Commission on Education Finance recommended additional weighting for ELL students.

BCAC has determined that there are three significant urban student demographics. We like to say that the only urban student demographic is poor students, but the data tell a different story and help us to be more targeted in state spending. The three student demographics are: (1) poor students; (2) students who are ELL and poor; and (3) students who receive special education services who are poor. Each of these three student demographics make up a substantial proportion of the student population in Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, New London, Waterbury, Meriden, New Britain and all the other Priority School Districts.

Please take a minute and review the charts attached to my testimony. They make the case for why additional weighting for ELL students is the ECS reform waiting for action. The charts are based on statewide averages on the CMT tests for students across the State of Connecticut. They show that poor students score about half as well as all other students in Connecticut. They ALSO show that ELL and special education students score less than half as well as poor students. This is dramatic. The data show why the ECS formula must be changed to adequately reflect the challenges of educating ELL students.

BCAC believes that all ELL students should be included in the formula and perhaps even "students who comes from homes in which English is not spoken." Just think about these students, they do not speak English at home, limiting their vocabulary and understanding of English words. As young children, they do not develop an English vocabulary, nor learn to count or know their colors in English -- learning that most children have before they enter kindergarten. Their parents do not read books in English to them, nor are they likely to have books or other reading material in English in the home.

Directing ECS funding to the most challenging students provides urban school districts with the funding needed to address these challenges. Commissioner McQuillan has said that our school districts are failing ELL students, but the state has yet to provide the resources for urban districts

to address the challenges of educating ELL students. Now is the time to do so by reforming the ECS formula !!

Oppose Level Funding for ECS

Level funding to all districts perpetuates and deepens the gross inequities in education funding for students across Connecticut. Funding inequities that have some districts spending as much as \$17,000 per student and others spending half that amount. These funding inequities have resulted in Connecticut being labeled as the state of "Two Connecticuts" when it comes to education funding.

Not only does level funding for every single district perpetuate the wide inequities in education spending across our state, it also disproportionately impacts and harms the poorer school districts. This is at a time when the poorer school districts are working mightily to improve student outcomes and test scores – without the funding support to do so.

A better choice for this committee to endorse would be to provide an **increase to the Priority School Districts**, the state's largest and poorest districts. These are the districts that will use additional resources to hire more teachers to lower class size, or provide more remedial tutoring for students falling behind, or expand summer school to more students, or hire more teaching coaches to improve teaching and learning, or provide more preschool.

Level funding is in reality a budget cut of 3-5%. Costs continue to rise for health care, fuel, supplies, energy, school repairs in older schools, and other costs. Now is the worst time to be giving the Priority School Districts a budget cut.

As recognized by the Governor's Education Finance Commission, Bridgeport is the most under-funded school district in the state. In Bridgeport, our schools have suffered more than \$36 million in cuts over the past five years. This now means that the Bridgeport schools have the fewest teachers and fewest administrators of all the urban districts. Supplies and educational materials are in short supply. Support services such as remedial tutoring have been cut substantially. Custodians and maintenance personnel have been cut. Secretaries, support staff, and paraprofessionals have been severely reduced. Our teachers teach under incredibly challenging circumstances with scarce resources.

It should not be a matter of geography whether a student lives in a district that spends \$17,000 per student, or one that spend little more than half of that. Where a student lives should not be the determining factor in the quality of the education they receive. Not in Connecticut.

A couple years ago, our state started to address these huge education spending inequities by reforming the ECS formula. Last year that came to a screeching halt. Now, more than ever, the state needs to continue to address these gross spending inequities across the state.

SB 1140

A provision in this bill requires that if a municipality declares a fiscal emergency, its Board of Education is required to transfer to that municipality any remaining unspent funds at the end of its fiscal year. Sounds like a provision tailored for Bridgeport.

However, it may not be what it appears to be. The City of Bridgeport put a hiring and spending freeze on the Bridgeport Board of Education without seeking its approval. This spending and hiring freeze has had a very negative impact on our schools. A custodian who retires mid-year cannot be replaced because of the hiring freeze even though the money is in the City-approved budget, so that school just gets dirtier and dirtier. Same for other staff positions and supplies, etc. Our schools and students have felt the impact.

It is worth noting that the Bridgeport Board of Education has balanced its budget every year – and this has meant more than \$36 million in cuts over the last five years. The \$20 million deficit is wholly on the City side of the budget. For years, the City of Bridgeport did not balance its budget and dipped into its reserves or rainy day fund. The City's reserves have declined from more than \$50 million in 2000 to very little today. While, we sympathized with our new Mayor Bill Finch who is trying to make reforms, this has been a long-term problem on the city side of not controlling its budget.

Why, now should the Board of Education and Bridgeport's schoolchildren have to pay the price. The current "surplus" at the Board of Ed is an artificial surplus that was created by the City. Bridgeport's schools are the most under-funded in the entire state of Connecticut and need to spend every nickel and dime they have in their budget. The City of Bridgeport has prevented this and now wants you to pass legislation that says it can not only create a surplus – or unspent funds at the end of the fiscal year – but can claim it as its own. This seems to violate every principle of education funding this committee holds dear. Instead, Bridgeport's Board of Education should be able to spend any "unspent funds" that the City has forced it to "save" for pre-purchasing of textbooks and supplies for next school year, so it can spend every single dollar next year to help improve student academic outcomes.

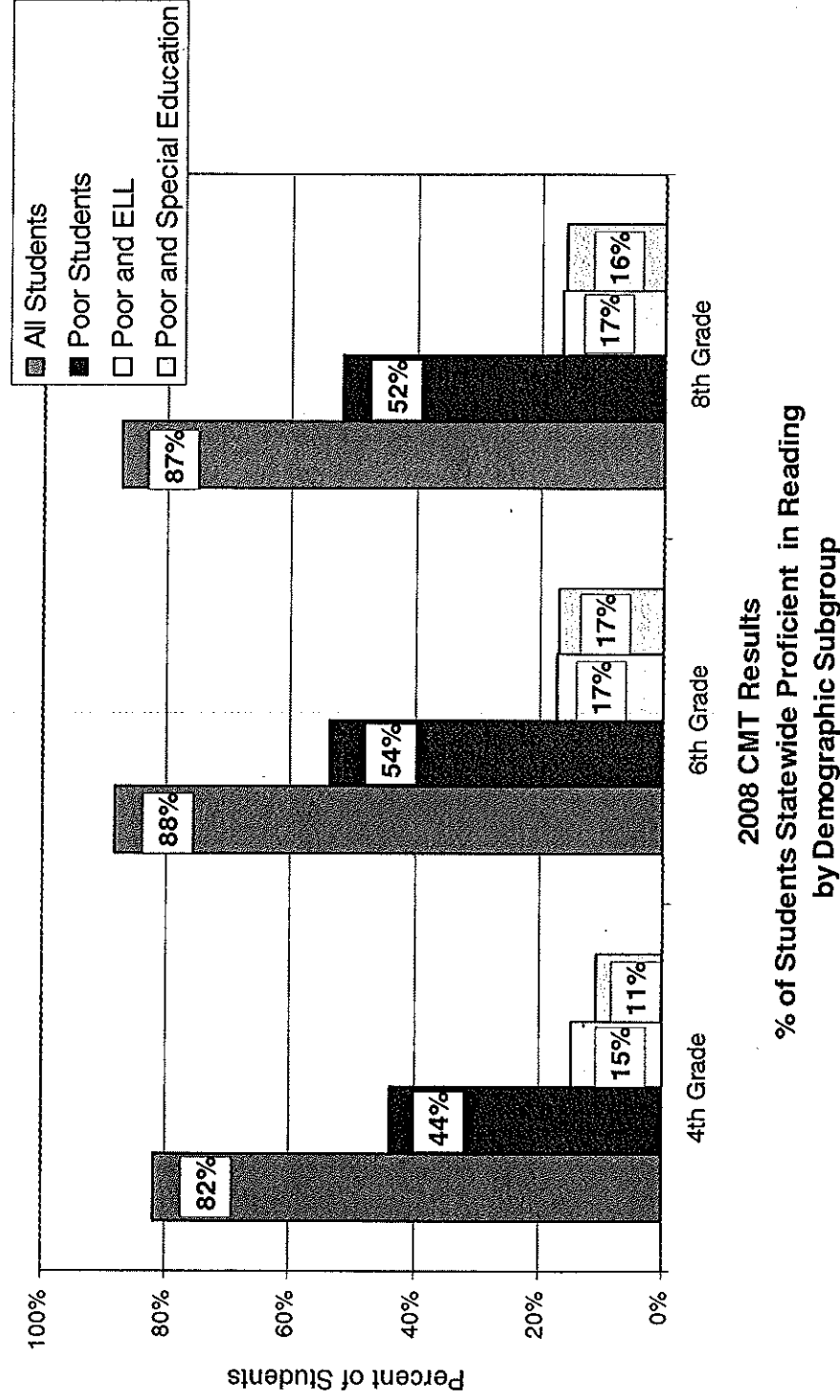
I guess you have figured out by now that we **strongly oppose the new Section 1 © of SB 1140.**

Thank you this opportunity to testify before the Education Committee.

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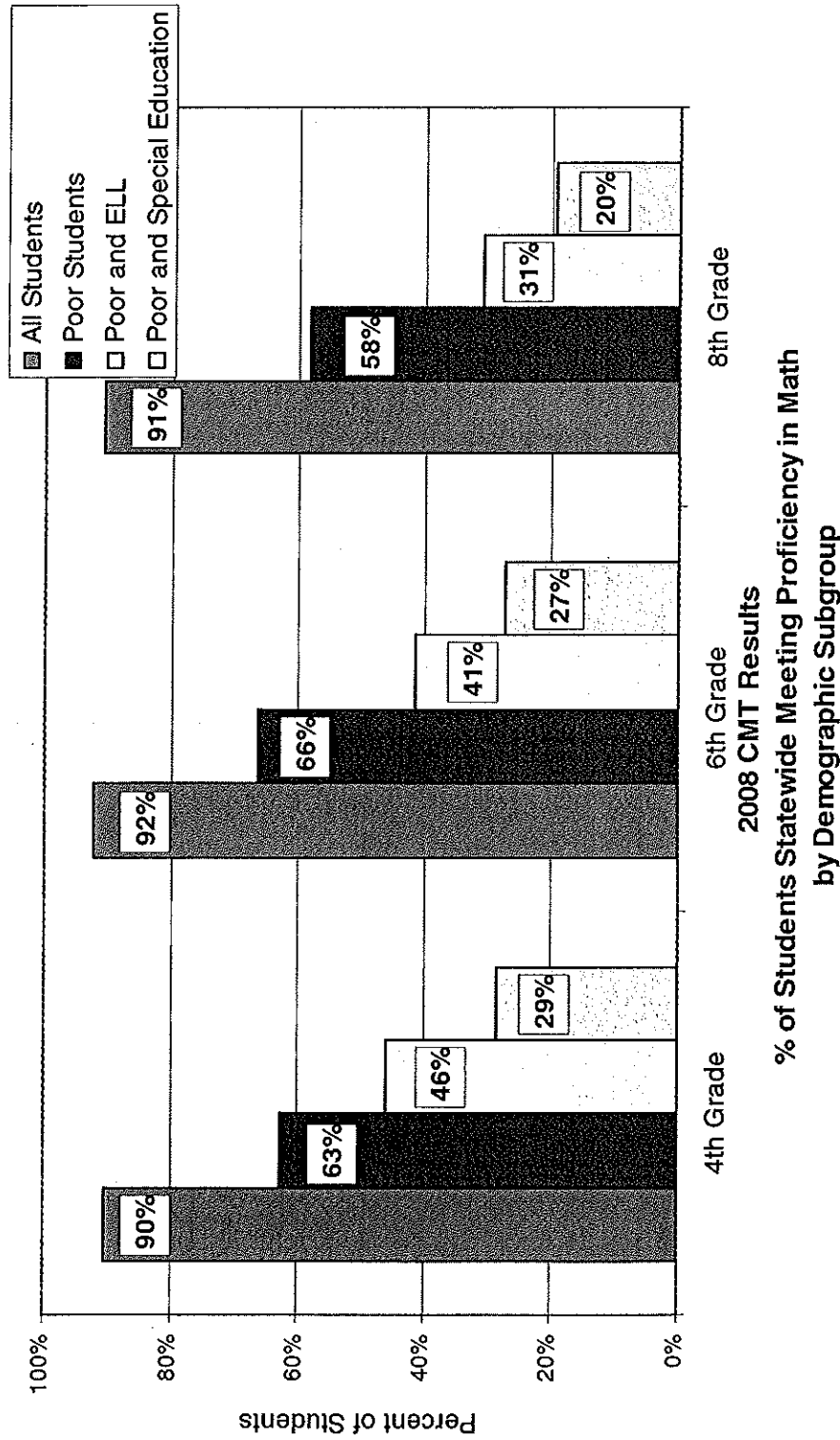
The Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition is a coalition of more than 80 member organizations dedicated to improving the well-being of Bridgeport's children through research, advocacy, community education and mobilization.

Poor Students Who are English Language Learners or in Special Education are MUCH LESS Likely to Meet Proficiency on the CMT Test in Reading



*All Students excludes Poor Students, English Language Learners and Special Education Students. ** ELL = English Language Learners
Source: CMT Data Interaction, cmtreports.com

Poor Students Who are English Language Learners or in Special Education are MUCH LESS Likely to Meet Proficiency on the CMT Test in Math



*All Students excludes Poor Students, English Language Learners and Special Education Students. ** ELL = English Language Learners
Source: CMT Data Interaction, cmtreports.com